

Photography: Embroidery in the morning, death in the afternoon - Life & Style - The Independent

There are many reasons why the matador is proud. Not the least of them is that he goes into battle dressed rather better than an archbishop, as Peter Muller's photographs celebrating the 'suit of lights' show.

What do you think of when you hear the word bullfight? Blood? Gore? Tragedy? Perhaps that's what photographer Peter Muller once thought too, but now he knows differently. The word that springs to mind today when asked that question is embroidery. And, after you read this, it may for you, too. A matador has to fight a bull, but what is more extraordinary: the ritualised dance of death or the fact that he has 12 miles of gold thread on his back?

Peter Muller knew the answer when he came across the tale of the matador's "suit of lights" while researching Spanish handicrafts. "I met Don Fermin, who is the leading designer for bullfighters, and saw that this was such an enormous subject. I'm not such a fanatic about the bullfight itself. I've had to see a lot and maybe too many," he says. But the embroidery is something else entirely and the result of his fanaticism can be seen in Oro Plata, in which matadors appear in full flow and finery. "It was not easy to get them to do a book. They are huge stars in Spain. They are like a Michael Jackson or a Mick Jagger," he says. Nor did they all like the idea of getting dressed up just to go to the photo studio. For many, putting on their "suit of lights" is almost a religious experience and, in the end, three refused to be photographed.

The story of the suit goes back to the Middle Ages when only nobles - and nobles on horseback at that - were allowed to fight the bulls. When the commoner was permitted into the ring in the eighteenth century, he entered on foot and stayed standing. At first he wore a red sash across the chest and leather breeches. While the noblemen on horseback continued to copy French style, the commoner borrowed from the aristocratic majos who adopted a Spanish style and were immortalised by Goya. By the end of the eighteenth century, the matador had been transformed from dandy to icon: silk replaced wool, and gold and silver ornamentation and arabesques were used instead of velvet or cord. Of everyone in the ring, only the matador was allowed to wear gold and this put the one-time man of the people up there with nobility and saints. The ladies of the court liked what they saw and paid for the best suits money could buy.

There have been couturiers for bullfighters since the nineteenth century and Don Fermin of Madrid dresses the best in the finest of traditions. His dream was to be a matador but he followed in the steps of his embroiderer mother instead. Now he designs from his house in Madrid, employing about 30 people. A matador's suit requires more than a month of work and, with each matador requiring six or seven suits a season, things can get a little busy. The cropped jacket alone can weigh between six and eight pounds and is rigid with extravagance and heavy with history. The patterns traced in gold cord often hark back to the Middle Ages and to Arab embroideries, arabesques and calligraphy. Once the design is tacked down, the embroiderers take care of the rest using gems, beads, pearl aglets, sequins, pure thread, fine gold or copper.

The jacket is really only the start, however. The shirt is white, often trimmed with lace, and there is a buttoned and embroidered vest that is the same colour as the trousers and a thin tie. The taleguillas, or short trousers, are made of silk or satin and the outside of the leg is embroidered. Underneath it all are tights, kept up with machos, garters at the knee (the tassels may match those on the epaulettes). The tights must be red, the only exception is if the matador is in mourning (in which case his jacket may be

embroidered with jet). The whole thing has to fit like a glove.

Now for the accessories. The capote de paseo, or ceremonial entrance cape, is made of silk or satin and is heavily embroidered, often with sacred images. The matador enters wearing this draped over the left shoulder and then lays it at the feet of whomever he wishes to honour. The third part of the bullfight is called the faena and for this the matador uses the brega cape; it is pink or yellow and very heavy. The montera, or cap, is worn low over the forehead. The Casa Fermin still makes these the old-fashioned way, that is with 2,500 small woollen knots. Wisely, most matadors hold on to theirs for life.

Nor are the colour choices exactly of the Dulux variety. A matador can choose from hundreds including crimson, turquoise, garnet, mauve and a range of greys with names like "burnt shadow", "merry widowers" and "London fog". Some are named after empresses, all are exceptional. The book concludes: "We are reminded of the tradition of the Merveilleuses, those elegant women of the French Directory (1795-1799) who referred to the 'thigh of flushed nymph' when evoking light pink."

I don't know how many bullfighters have chosen thigh of nymph but there is at least one who probably wishes he had. Luis Miguel Domingun was one of the greats but everyone makes mistakes. He made at least 16 of them in the ring - that's how many horn stabs scarred his body - and one in the couturier's studio. This latter can be summed up in one word: purple. "I was in a bullfight in Melilla, for which I wore this purple and gold suit for the first time. I was gored in the thigh by the bull," he wrote in the preface before his death in 1996. He decided to give the suit to his brother who wore it and was promptly gored. His brother then handed it down to a novice and he was gored. "The suit was nothing but a hand-out, wandering from ring to ring, worn in less and less impressive circles and each time it left blood and tragedy behind," he said. "So I say no to purple! Maybe it has something against me, I'll never know. But it is better to keep away. Perhaps every bullfighter has a purple in his past."

The world of the bullfight layers ritual upon ritual. Every suit embodies centuries of tradition and the matador is not allowed simply to slip into his suit after a quick shower. There is a ritual to be followed and, while the matador rests, his mozo de espada (valet and sword handler) does something called preparing the chair. This means placing the suspenders, belt, tights, tie, shirt and jacket on the back of a chair. On the seat he arranges the taleguillas with the montera on top. Finally the capote de paseo is laid over the whole thing with the soft shoes placed on the floor.

The grooming begins two or three hours before the fight and only men are admitted to the ceremony. The matador's face must be perfectly smooth before the dressing begins. There is a precise order to be followed as the clothing is put on and, once that is done, the matador has a few moments to pray in front of a portable altar. The ceremony is a private one and there are no photographs of it in this book. This does not bother Peter Muller who thinks himself lucky to have caught as much as he has on camera. "Nobody has done something like this book. This is immortal, something that is forever."

And so it seems is the embroidery - though you cannot say the same for the men or the beasts who circle each other with such strange flamboyance in the dusk of a Spanish midsummer's day.

"Oro Plata: Embroidered Costumes of the Bullfight", with photographs by Peter Muller, is published by Assouline Press, price pounds 40.

Fine and dandy: above, from left, blue and gold capote de paseo (a ceremonial entrance cape) embroidered in silk, representing the 'Virgin of the Forsaken'; Pepe Luis Martn in a suit embroidered with a late 17th-century pine cone motif; Jose Ortega Cano in garnet and gold pants, with a late 19th-century wave motif. Far left: Juan Mora in a burgundy and gold suit with Aztec motif. Left: Luis Francisco Espl in a midnight blue suit embroidered with jet to a 17th-century design



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Readability version 0.5.1